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"An Old Town By the Sea"

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The Nutter House—Thomas Bailey Aldrich Memorial

"An Old Town by the Sea"

HEN the locomotive gave a scream, the engineer rang his bell, and we plunged into the twilight of a long wooden building, open at both ends. Here we stopped, and the conductor, thrusting his head in at the car door, cried out, 'Passengers for Rivermouth!'

Every person properly familiar with the best books, as every person ought to be, should know that these are the words in which "Tom Bailey" describes his arrival back at the town of his birth—Portsmouth, in New Hampshire, scarcely concealed under the designation of "Rivermouth" in that immortal picture of New England boy life of half a century ago—"The Story of a Bad Boy." It is a long while since the present writer first read the story, upon its original appearance in *Our Young Folks* magazine. It must indeed have firmly caught his fancy then, for never in all the years since has

he passed through Portsmouth, without a lively recollection, as the train slows up in the long—not wooden now—"building open at both ends," that this is where "Tom Bailey" lived, and looking out of the car window he beholds the scene re-enacted there upon the platform as the "straight, brisk old gentleman," no less a person than Grandfather Nutter himself, welcomes back to the austere New England of his birth the lad from New Orleans—that most delightful of all lads of fiction, the thoroughly natural and altogether lovable young rascal Tom Bailey—the Bad Boy.

The literary or historical pilgrim, forsaking the railroad train for a ramble about the glorious elm-arcaded streets of Portsmouth, feels himself passing at once under the glamour associated with the things of that elder New England. Ancient houses and church buildings, the dreamy wharves whence a bustling West India trade, odorous with spices, long since withdrew itself, a certain decorousness of atmosphere that envelops the life of the place, compel a welcome belief that here the obsessed and care-worn soul might for a season retire and find peace. Here in a peculiar measure the pilgrim encounters that flavor inseparable from

the period in which this part of the new world had its historical beginnings.

For Portsmouth, as the years in America are reckoned, is a very aged place. The picturesque banks of the Piscataqua were explored first in 1603 by Martin Pring, followed in eleven years by the romantic and adventurous John Smith, to whose memory a shaft was in later years erected upon one of the Isles of Shoals. It was Smith who prepared and laid before Prince Charles a map of this seacoast, whereupon that scion of royalty gave to the country the name of New England. In 1623 John Mason and Sir Ferdinando Gorges, friends of Smith's, securing a grant of land comprising what is now New Hampshire, sent out a settling party. In 1631 an additional party came and built the "Great House," the first building to be put up in Portsmouth. In 1653 the township was incorporated under this name. So Portsmouth is very old.

The town lay in the main line of travel that ran from Boston out to all the region lying to the north. By land and by sea it was stirred in that earlier day by the active life of the young and growing nation. At its famous taverns—the Earl of Halifax, Stoodley's, and

others---men whose names now linger upon the tongue of romance found their "warmest welcome." Washington, Lafayette and John Hancock ; Louis Philippe and his two brothers, banished from France and on their way to visit General Knox at his distant chateau in Thomaston ; the dignified and portly Knox himself, on frequent occasions—these and many others of the historical figures of early times have tested the hospitalities of the private homes and public inns of Portsmouth. Of those private homes, the men and women who dwelt in them, and the history and gossip that hover about them still, delightful chapters have been written. Many of these houses stand today, examples of a handsome and stately architecture whose charm the modern builder seems unable quite to grasp.

One may spend a chance hour in Portsmouth, equipped with the receptive mind, and be very sure of taking away something delightful to remember. If time permits a longer stay, with a visit to the spots of historic interest, as well as some having to do with the more modern life of the community, pushing so far perhaps as to Kittery and the interesting navy yard

across the "singing river," then may much indeed be found to satisfy the inquiring spirit.

Singularly enough, until the present time, amid its many memorials of the past, the old town possessed none to which the public enjoyed the privilege of access. Occasionally upon sufferance the chance visitor was admitted to an inner view of an old house whose outward appearance had charmed the eye and stirred the imagination; but there opportunity spent itself.

Among the poets and authors whose poems and writings have illuminated the past of Portsmouth, Thomas Bailey Aldrich clearly stands pre-eminent. This is the place of his birth, and it was in the house, now 45 Court street, owned by his maternal grandfather, Thomas Darling Bailey (the "Nutter House" of the story), that he spent those juvenile years which are described with such accuracy in his early prose writing, "The Story of a Bad Boy." In this book, and in his novels "Prudence Palfrey" and "The Queen of Sheba," Portsmouth figures beneath the thinnest of disguises as "Rivermouth." In the maturer work of his later years he harks back to the place of his early recollections. In "An Old Town By The



The Dining Room—Thomas Bailey Aldrich Memorial

Sea" we find it set forth with a closeness of detail and that richness of humorous fancy and allusion that are such distinguishing features of Aldrich's prose. In his poetry too appear many allusions taking rise in the poet's memory of the years spent at the quaint old seaport town.

It was a happy thought that inspired the Portsmouth people, on the death of Mr. Aldrich in 1907, to acquire the Court street house and set it apart as a memorial to the distinguished poet. In the years since the death of Grandfather Nutter (it is difficult to think of him by any other name than that of the story) the house had passed into alien hands. The Thomas Bailey Aldrich Memorial was formed and incorporated and a fund of ten thousand dollars raised by popular subscription in sums from one dollar to one thousand dollars. The old house was bought. Mrs. Aldrich and Major Talbot Aldrich, the poet's surviving son, and surviving members of the Bailey family, became interested and work was begun restoring the house and garden to their former condition, as set forth with such photographic fidelity in "The Story of a Bad Boy."

"The Nutter House has been in our family nearly a hundred years and is an honor to the

builder Such timber and such workmanship do not often come together in houses built nowadays. Imagine a low-studded structure, with a wide hall running through the middle On each side of the hall are doors opening into large rooms wainscoted and rich in wood-carvings about the mantel-pieces and corners. The walls are covered with pictured paper, representing landscapes and sea-views."

Painstaking labor has brought back the Nutter House so closely to the conditions that characterized it when it sheltered the boy Aldrich ("Tom Bailey") that the visitor familiar with the book might well marvel at the fidelity with which the man writing in middle life could recall the picture of his boyhood home, did we not remember that the faculty of observation that usually distinguishes literary genius is a gift bestowed in very early life.

"A wide staircase leads from the hall to the second story," write Tom Bailey in these juvenile memoirs. " Over this is the garret. I need not tell a New England boy what a museum of curiosities is the garret of a well-regulated New England house of fifty or sixty years standing. Here meet together, as if by some preconcerted arrangement, all the

broken-down chairs of the household, all the spavined tables, all the seedy hats, all the intoxicated looking boots, all the split walking-sticks that have retired from business, 'weary with the march of life.' "

"My grandfather's house stood a little way back from the main street In the rear was a pleasant garden."

"Nothing among my new surroundings gave me more satisfaction than the cozy sleeping apartment that had been prepared for myself. It was the hall room over the front door. I had never before had a chamber all to myself, and this one, about twice the size of our state-room on the Typhoon, was a marvel of neatness and comfort. Pretty chintz curtains hung at the window, and a patch quilt of more colors than were in Joseph's coat covered the little truckle-bed. The pattern of the wall paper left nothing to be desired in that line. On a gray background were small bunches of leaves, unlike any that ever grew in this world; and on every other bunch perched a yellow-bird, pitted with crimson spots, as if it had just recovered from a severe attack of the small-pox. That no such bird ever existed did not detract from my admiration of each one. There were two hundred

and eighty-six of these birds in all, not counting those split in two where the paper was badly joined. I counted them once when I was laid up with a fine black eye, and falling asleep immediately dreamed that the whole flock suddenly took wing and flew out of the window. From that time I was never able to regard them merely as inanimate objects."

Tom Bailey's little room exists today as it existed in that halcyon period of golden boyhood that the book recalls. Here is the "wash-stand in the corner," the "looking-glass in a filigreed frame," the "high-backed chair studded with brass nails like a coffin," and that precious shelf of books, with the identical volumes out of which the boyish Aldrich drank his first inspirations of poetry and romance. Never could be imagined a "boy's room" more nearly perfect in these essentials dear to the boyish heart. So also reappear the other rooms of the house, furnished again with the heirlooms brought back by the members of the family among whom they had been dispersed. Even to the minutest details the place presents a faithful transcript of the typical New England home of three-quarters of a century ago. The garden at the rear of the house has been restored and



here in luxuriance bloom the numerous flowers mentioned in Mr. Aldrich's poems.

In a corner of the garden there has been erected a fire-proof building, in which have been disposed the literary and other treasures gathered by Mr. Aldrich during his busy and happily-endowed lifetime. Here is the table upon which he wrote the book so intimately associated with this house; here are priceless first editions, autographs, portraits, silver of peculiar beauty and interest, countless objects beautiful and rare, loaned to the Memorial by Mrs. Aldrich. Upon it all looks down benignly the portrait of the Poet.

In the roll of our country's great poets and writers none other has left so intimate and absorbing a story of his youth as the classic from which the foregoing extracts are taken. The opportunity to bring together the house and story was unique. It has been seized upon and developed with exceeding taste.

The visitor to the house finds the old door with the brass knocker and the old door-plate bearing Thomas Darling Bailey's name. Inside, if he will be at pains to read the book, he will encounter such startling accuracy of details, down to Grandfather Bailey's actual walking-



The Kitchen—Thomas Bailey Aldrich Memorial

stick standing in its accustomed corner in the prim, wainscoted hall, that he finds himself transported to the very chapters and atmosphere of the story. Tom Bailey, Miss Abigail and Kitty Collins are no longer vague characters of fiction, but veritable persons upon whom the visitor discovers himself happily calling. There is nothing like this to be encountered elsewhere in America.

To the lover of a good story there is no higher pleasure possible than to come upon the scene of its chapters and discover nothing wanting. This in the most satisfying sense is the experience of the sentimental visitor to the Nutter House. And not alone in respect of the story which it illustrates is the house destined to become famous. It would be difficult to imagine a more successful instance than this presents of the rescue of an old place. "From cellar to attic" one perceives the absolutely faithful preservation, not only in details but of the spirit of a house of the long ago, that vanishing period of our grandfathers. As time goes on, the faithfulness of this restoration, and its importance as a historical as well as literary New England landmark, will be increasingly accentuated. For a comparison, in the com-

pleteness of the achievement and the wealth of literary treasure and association gathered in its museum, one must turn to the Shakespeare Memorial upon the banks of the Avon.

The Memorial was formally dedicated on June 30, 1908, by public services which all Portsmouth gathered to take part in. A brilliant company of literary and public men and women came from afar to do honor to the memory of their gifted friend. It was the universal opinion, which the general public will more and more come to recognize, that Portsmouth in thus honoring the dead Poet will not the less bring honor to itself; and that the Thomas Bailey Aldrich Memorial, upon a plan so admirably conceived and carried out, will become a literary shrine to which will turn in the progress of time the feet of an appreciative nation.

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